

The Two Of Us

I am in a screening room somewhere in the suburbs of Paris, waiting for the film of 'Intimacy' to begin. A few months ago, during the shooting, I saw some of the rushes, but I have seen no cut material. Now the film is almost finished, with most of the scenes in their definitive order and a good deal of the music in place. The only missing scene is the final one, where the characters played by Kerry Fox and Mark Rylance meet for the last time.

The director, Patrice Chereau sits somewhere behind me. There are a handful of people present, the editor and others connected with the film. But the room is big; people seem to disappear into the plush velvet of the deep seats. I forget they are there.

Although Chereau and I worked closely together at times, and the film was shot in English, the script was written by his own writer, a woman, in French. I had decided I'd spent long enough with the material and lacked the heart to look at it again. Nevertheless, the film will be something that a number of us - director, writers, actors, editor, cameraman - have made together. And after all the talk, I have little idea what it will be like; evaluating a film from the rushes is like taking a few sentences from a novel and trying to work out the plot. So it is my film but not mine. I made the characters and most of the story, but Chereau transformed, cast and cut it; and, of course, his style and voice as a director is his own. Chereau arranged to come and see me in London about three years ago. He was shy, he said, and didn't speak good English. My French is hopeless, but it seemed better to meet without an interpreter. Whether or not you want to spend a lot of time and energy working with someone you barely know is something, I guess, you can realise only intuitively. Patrice explained that he wanted to make a film of my novel "Intimacy", which he had read in French. Also, he said he liked my stories, particularly "Nightlight", collected in "Love In A Blue Time". In this story a couple who run into one another by chance and hardly know one another, begin to meet once a week, on Wednesday afternoons, to make love. Somehow, they never speak; after a while they are unable to.

At that time I did not know Patrice's work or reputation in the theatre, opera and cinema as a director and occasional actor. This made it a little easier for me to see him without enthusiasm or dismay. After we'd looked at one another for a bit - not unlike the couple at the beginning of the film, about to embark on something big, without knowing the 'little things' about one another - I said he should take what he wanted from my work and make the film he wanted to make.

It was easy to say. I didn't quite mean it. Nonetheless, it seemed like a good way to start, and I knew, at least, that I did want to start. Later I thought, what can these two strangers, a gay Frenchman and a straight British-Indian make together, if anything? What is possible between us and what impossible? How far can we go? What will this do to me? It would be the first time I'd worked with a non-British director. Would be anything particularly 'French' about Patrice, or, for that matter, 'English' about me? My

sense was that the French have a better visual sense than the English, though less narrative grasp. But this was really only a prejudice. Patrice is, I guess, ten years older than me and about the same size, with similar back problems. He is gentle, unpretentious and willing to be amused. He is modest but not unaware of his own ability. He is certainly less impatient and bad-tempered than me. He goes out more than I do. He is more decisive. I noticed that we tended to dislike the same things, which is always a comforting complicity.

In the end, I am not sure what it is that my imagination likes to do with him, but just looking at Patrice, or hearing his voice on the phone, cheers me up; he makes me want to try to be a better artist. He respects me, and I him, but not too much.

When I first started to write, as a teenager in the suburbs, I wanted to be a novelist. I thought that writing books in a room on my own was all I would do. The work was self-sufficient. For me, as a young man, that was the point. There were no intermediaries or interpreters - the reader read what you wrote. Some people, I guess, become writers because they're afraid of others or addicted to solitude. Perhaps they read a lot, or drew or watched TV alone as children. Being with others might be the problem that isolation can solve.

However, when you are writing at last, the same questions appear repeatedly. Why am I doing this? Who is this for? Why write this rather than that? I'm sure people in other professions don't have an existential crisis every morning. It's as if you are seeking any excuse to stop. You can, of course, grow out of these questions, or tire of yourself and your own preoccupations. Or you can hope that collaboration will push you past them. A director will have different doubts and fears. You want to see how others work, and - why not? - be changed by them.

My first professional project was a play called the King and Me, produced at the Soho Poly theatre in 1980. It was about a woman's infatuation with Elvis Presley, and was directed by Antonia Bird, who I knew from the Royal Court. Her enthusiasm, and the final production, made me feel that what I'd written had some objective merit, and reached beyond my desk. A couple of years later, working with the theatre company Joint Stock, I collaborated with the director Max Stafford-Clark and the actors we chose, to 'make' a play for the Royal Court - 'Borderline'. I discovered how enjoyable it could be to write for specific actors. Writing new scenes and lines in the rehearsal room, it was possible, almost straight away, to see whether they worked. After, I found it difficult, and depressing, to return to my room and, alone, begin to generate material from scratch.

Since then I have collaborated with more than a dozen directors. Most of my work, including the prose, has passed through other's hands before it reaches an audience. If being imaginative alone can be difficult enough, I am both scared but mostly intrigued by what others will do with what I have started.

What will you think or say if you free associate, if you let your mind run without inhibition? There are plenty of anxieties there. What, then, will it be like making mistakes, saying daft things, having strange ideas, in front of someone else? Will you be overwhelmed or forced into compromise by the other; or vice versa? Will you feel liberated by them, or will new fears will be aroused? Which particular fears might they be?

The challenge of collaboration is to find a process where both of you can be fearlessly foolish; to see whether your union will be a dilution or expansion of your combined abilities. You want to be surprised by the other person, not limited by them. Neither of you wants to waste time pursuing an idea that just seems uninteresting. Ê

However, collaboration is like friendship or like writing; you can only start off with a vague idea of where you are going. After a bit, if you're lucky, you begin to see whether or not there is a worthwhile destination ahead.

Most artists with a distinct voice soon develop their area of interest - the characters, scenes, moods - which they will work on for most of their lives; and most artists, like most lives, are repetitious. A collaboration is an attempt, then, to enlarge or multiply selves, to extend range and possibility. You might make something with another person that you couldn't make alone. Whether the purpose of this is the final product - the film - or the intimacy of partnership, the pleasure of meeting someone regularly, to talk about something that excites you both, I'm not sure. Probably it is all of these things.

Each of the numerous directors I have worked with in the theatre, television and cinema has been interested in sponsoring a different aspect of my work. There was a particular thing the piece said about them, that they wanted to emphasis, or to say through me. Then, once the work commenced, I began to write for them, for their idea of the project, and to their doubts and strengths. This process makes you become a different kind of writer - a different person, to a certain extent - with each director.

I can think of scores of good collaborations. The ones that come to mind are from dance, or theatre, or music. I think of Miles and Coltrane; Miles and anyone; and of Zakir Hussein, John McLaughlin and Jan Garbarek; of Brian Eno and David Byrne. The list could be endless.

It would be a mistake to put the purity of isolated creativity on one side, and collaboration on the other. In a sense all creativity will be collaborative: the artist works with her material, with her subject and with the history of her chosen form.

As well as this, most artists, I assume, relish a certain amount of the unexpected, of chance and contingency, of something odd but useful that might just turn up. What did you see, hear, say, yesterday? How might it be incorporated into the present work? Something going wrong in the right way can be fruitful. Another person could be the 'contingency' that helps this to happen. Maybe all artistic activity is a kind of collage, then, the putting together of various bits and pieces gathered from here and there, and

integrated into some kind of whole. How are the elements selected or chosen? I don't know. It has to be an experiment.

Which isn't to say that all attempts at collaboration always work. A couple of years before I met Cheureau, I was asked by a director to come up with an idea we would then develop into a script.

Together, he and I sat in an expensive rented room every weekday afternoon, for a month. Most of the time he seemed to have his head in his hands, while I made notes on various stories I was writing, and then put my head in my hands. What we could never do was put our heads in each others hands. We would go round and round, and back and forth but rarely forward. Occasionally we'd have an idea we liked, or break into laughter, but we remained mysterious to one another, too guarded and too respectful. I expected him to take the lead, to tell me what he wanted. Or maybe he expected me to take the lead and tell him what I wanted. The project disappeared into a miasma of misplaced politeness. After these sessions, on the tube, I would become claustrophobic, thinking I thought I would go mad or start screaming. The work became like being at school, or in a hated job. I suspect the problem was that we were both trying to do the same thing, write, and were inhibiting one another.

There was little hesitation in Patrice; he didn't lack tenacity or appear to doubt that this was a film he wanted to make. A film never leaves you alone, even when you're not with it, and there is always more you could be doing. A film, a project beginning in a room with a couple of people saying 'why don't we try so-and-so', ultimately involves scores of people, a huge amount of money and, more importantly, an enormous store of hope and belief.

Cheureau and I started to meet regularly in London. We decided early on that my novel "Intimacy" was too internal, and, probably, too dark, to make a film - a conventional film, that people might watch - on its own. It could, though, function as the background to, or beginning of, another film. We needed something else 'on top'; more stories, characters, action.

I showed him a collection of my stories in manuscript, 'Midnight All Day', to see whether there was anything in them he fancied. Some of the material from the story 'Strangers When We Meet' went into the film; parts of 'In A Blue Time' were utilised, and, possibly, ideas from other stories; I forget which.

During our meetings we improvised stories; we gossiped; we talked about the theatre, literature, our lives, our parents. If our age seems 'unideological' compared to the period between the mid-sixties and mid-eighties; if Britain seems pleasantly hedonistic and politically torpid, it might be because politics has moved inside, into the body. The politics of personal relationships, of private need, of gender, marriage, sexuality, the place of children, have replaced that of society, which seems uncontrollable.

So we talked about bodies, about death and decay; about Lucien Freud and Bacon,

and the hyper-realism of some recent photography and how close you could get to the face without losing the image altogether. We talked about how many contemporary visual artists are interested in the body and its needs: the body rather than the mind or ideas; and the body on its own, in relative isolation. The history of photography and painting is, among other things, the history of how the body has been regarded.

We talked about what bodies do and what they tell us. After the twentieth century it is, it seems, a culture of disgust and of shock that we inhabit, in which humans are reduced to zero, the achievements of culture rendered meaningless - a stance often called the human condition. Yet this kind of fastidious despair can become an aesthetic pose, creating its own cultural privileges and becoming a kind of vanity.

We talked about the character of Jay, about London and the speed with which it is changing into an international city, about the couple who meet without speaking. Why don't they talk rather than touch? What is the terror of communication? If you speak to someone, what might happen? If you don't, what other possibilities are there? To what extent are people disposable? What do we owe them or them us?

Patrice seemed interested in the power of impersonal sexuality, in passion without relationship, in the way people can be narcissistically fascinated by one another's bodies and their own sexual pleasure, while keeping away strong feeling and emotional complexity. We talked about what sex enables people to do together, and what it can stop them doing. Impersonality frees the imagination, of course; but, in the end, the imagination isn't sufficient when it comes to other people. What we usually need is more of them and less of us. We have to let a certain amount of them in. But that can seem like the hardest, most frightening thing, particularly as you get older, particularly when you feel you have failed before.

What Patrice wanted was to capture the desperation of Jay and Claire's love-making. These intense sessions were called 'the Wednesdays' and would punctuate the film, being different each time.

We are, of course, fascinated by what goes on in other couple's privacy. Their bodies, thoughts and conversation are compelling. They were for us as children and continue to be so. However, I can't help wondering whether sexuality is better written than filmed. Looking doesn't seem convey the feel of passion. Looking may be more erotic than reading; it is more immediate. But looking may fail to capture the intricacies of feeling; it won't necessarily increase our understanding. In fact all it might do is make us embarrassed or conscious that we are watching a choreographed sexual act; it might merely make us feel left out.

Perhaps this is because of the way sexuality is usually portrayed on film. Patrice and I talked about keeping the camera close to the bodies; not over-lighting them, or making them look pornographically enticing or idealised. It will be a sexuality that isn't sanitised, symbolised or bland, that isn't selling anything. The point is to look at how difficult sex is, how terrifying, and what a darkness and obscenity our pleasures can be. Patrice will,

therefore, have to make a sexually explicit film. To a certain extent the actors will have to go through what the characters experience, which will be difficult for everyone.

This will, initially, I guess, seem shocking in the cinema. Not that it won't take long for the shock to wear off, and for the act to seem common. The kiss between the boys in 'My Beautiful Laundrette' seemed outrageous and even liberating, to some people, in the mid-80s; now you can hardly turn on the TV without seeing boys snogging, particularly on the sports channels.

Interest in sexuality may take different forms at different times: it might be paedophilia, perhaps, or miscegenation, gerontophilia, lesbianism or fetishism. But there always seems to be some aspect of desire that is of concern. It's the one thing that never goes away, or leaves people's minds. Perhaps desire never stops feeling like madness.

Shocking people, however, can be a mixed blessing. It can be amusing to disturb but there can be no guarantee that you won't be resented for the annoyance you have caused. Recently someone gave me what they considered an 'important' novel to read, warning me that it was 'shocking'. The novel was as they described - it did offend and displease me - mostly because it was violent. The violence kept my attention even as it horrified me. Not that it was a good novel. I was no better off after reading it than I was before. I felt, in fact, that the violence was partly directed at the reader. I had been shaken awake by someone who had nothing to tell me.

The conversations between Patrice and I would only fertilise the film rather than determine it. I tried to generate ideas for him to use, alter or throw away, as he liked. It is tempting but would be mistake to become too possessive of those ideas. If he didn't like them, I could discard them, use them elsewhere, or make them into something else. Certainly, Patrice had his own interests and preoccupations which intersected in some places with mine. He is not the sort merely to find a style to fit the writer. What we tried to do was find a starting point in order to help one another.

Not long after a series of these talks, the writer began work. Scripts started to arrive regularly at my house. They got longer and longer. It is always like this and it always seems endless, the continuous sifting of material. Patrice moved to London, looked for locations and began to see actors for the main parts. Almost all the male actors we met were terrified of having others see their bodies: there was no way they would strip for the camera. The women seemed to expect that this would be required.

As the film went into production I was less involved. Some directors, like Stephen Frears, enjoy the writer being around - it is, after all, something of the writer's world that has to be captured. Therefore the creative work continues on the set, and during the editing.

Other directors can become quite paranoid about writers, feeling them as critical, cramping presences. After the initial meeting, the next time they want to see the writer is at the wrap party, or the premier. The writers can seem to have too much authority over the material. On the other hand, what can be traumatic for the writer is acknowledging the fact the director will need to change the script in order to possess it, to feel it's his. Writer and director can become jealous of one another. Not that Patrice is like this. He has worked with many writers.

For me, the writer can have one crucial function. Directors, particularly after they have made a number of films, can become over-involved in the technique of film-making. Writers, too, of course, can become over-interested in language, say, or in certain technical problems only of interest to them. Perhaps decadence in art is like narcissism in a person - there's no one else in mind.

But audiences, I like to believe, look 'through' the film-making and even the performances, to the story, to the character's lives and dilemmas. They require a human truth, in order to examine the violence of their own feelings. If they cannot see something of themselves in the story, they are unlikely to see anything else. It should be part of the writer's job to remind the director of this. The writer's detachment from the film-making can be an advantage: like the director, he will have a sense of the whole film, but can also function, at times, as a stand-in for the needs and desire of the audience.

During the filming Patrice sometimes dropped by in the evening for a drink. I could see on his face how stressful and difficult making a movie is. On top of everything else, Patrice was making a film in a foreign language, with, mostly, an English crew, in a city he didn't know well.

Unsurprisingly, most film directors I know are a walking bag of maladies. They want you to know how tough their jobs are. What exactly is tough about it? I suppose it is hard wanting something to be so good; it is hard to care so much about something which could so easily be dismissed, a mere film when there are so many films. Fortunately, Patrice mostly shot what he needed and was pleased with the actor's performances.

Now the almost completed film rushes at me. The camera moves quickly; the cutting is fast and the music loud, in the modern manner, but not only for effect, as in videos, but to show us the force, speed and impersonality of London today. Perhaps it takes a foreign director to make London look the way it feels. This seems like the city I live in. The method of filming represents, too, the wild fury of Jay's mind.

At the end of the screening my mind and my feelings seem to be going in all directions at once. I try to clear my head. What do I feel? Relief, confusion, excitement, dismay, delight! Bits of criticism surface. I have to try and say something coherent. My mind feels crowded with important and irrelevant remarks.

As always Patrice is patient; he listens; we talk and argue. I am laudatory, critical and apologetic at the same time. I have ideas for cuts, changes, re-arrangements. There are several things I don't understand, that don't seem clear. I keep saying that I have only seen the film once. He tells me that that is the number of times, if we are lucky, that the audience will see the film. More screenings, he says, and you'll be too sympathetic; you'll understand too much

He is right; my compliance will do him no good. Most directors have plenty of that as it is. If we argue, both of us, along with our friendship, will survive.

In the end, when finishing the film, I know he will go his own way, which is all he can do. That is what I would recommend; it is what I would do. For me, it is enough that what has been accomplished was worth the effort and a pleasure. Whether anyone else will agree, is another matter and up to them.